Now is the Time:

The Refection of My Experience as a Doctoral Student in the Marshall University Leadership Studies Program

Christopher D. Jackson

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Dr. Sherry Early, Chair

Dr. Bobbie Nicholson

Dr. Jessica Hanna

Dr. R. Charles Byers

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**Introduction**

Growing up, I was never a studious person. My mother used to call me a social butterfly because I was more interested in hanging out with my friends and attending parties than I was giving attention to my academic studies. To be 100 percent transparent, it was not until I had my first child in 2012 that I began to think about the future and what I needed to do in order to provide a better life for me and my family.

I have worked in higher education since 2001. I have served as a Residence Director, Coordinator of Continuing Education, Assistant to the University President’s Special Assistant, Director of Recruitment, and Coordinator of Student Activities and Greek Life, all at West Virginia State University. Each of these positions strengthened my resolve to make higher education a career. Within the past five years I have been mentoring students on campus; not through any kind of coordinated program but on a personal level. Most of my mentees are males that are members of various Greek organizations on campus. Being that I am the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) Advisor on campus, I have a very strong relationship with the members of the Greek organizations, both male and female. One life lesson that I try to saturate their young minds with is the notion to be the best at whatever they choose to be. Whether they choose to be janitors or doctors, they need to approach their career choices with enthusiasm, optimism, and confidence, and to always be willing to learn and accept criticism. Five years ago, I decided to practice what I preach and pursue a doctoral degree.

I applied to Marshall University’s Doctor of Education, Leadership Studies: Higher Education Administration Program in 2012/2013. A requirement for admission was to take the Miller Analogy Test (MAT) or the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). I knew that I was not a good test taker, so I opted for the MAT; it was a shorter test and it was half the cost of the GRE. After my first failed attempt, I did not get discouraged. I studied and took the MAT for a second time, and a third, and a forth; actually, I am not sure how many times I took that test. I can remember that after the last time I failed to meet the required score for admission, I felt defeated. I can remember calling my mother and telling her that I am giving up. My mother attentively listened to me as I vented. She never interrupted me during my rant. When I was finished she said to me, “Chris, it just isn’t your time; but when your time comes you need to be ready. God will open the door for you but when he does you have got to be prepared for what he has in store for you.” That was not the response I was looking for; however, I listened and took a break from my pursuit of a doctorate degree. A few years passed and as I sat in a staff meeting I received an email from a lady named Kelly Gilkerson. In the email Ms. Gilkerson stated that she was going through old files and saw that based on the programs updated criteria, I qualified for admission, and that if I were still interested, to complete a new application. I must have stared at that email for five minutes. I thought it was a mistake on Marshall’s behalf, so I called Ms. Gilkerson. Fortunately, it was no mistake. I actually qualified for admission. All I could think about was what my mother said to me a few years prior. Here and now is the opportunity that my mother said would come. Now is the time.

**Coursework**

My first semester as a doctoral student was a difficult one. I had been out of school for eleven years; needless to say, it took some time for me to get used to writing and reading in a classroom setting, but it all came back to me after a few weeks. My first semester courses consisted of Research Design taught by Dr. Childress, Principles of Leadership taught by Dr. Watts, and Introduction to Doctoral Studies.

It was in Dr. Childress’ class that I began to understand to structure of research; the different types of research designs and how those designs differ. The class was very informative. The chapter critiques were the key to the comprehension of the text for the class. Through the critiques I was able to address questions and concerns to my assigned readings; but it was the final project that brought it all together. The final project was for the class participants to submit a research proposal. My dissertation topic at the time was on the socialization of African Americans in student affairs. Dr. Childress gave us several opportunities to turn in the proposal for edits; and with each submission, he would provide feedback, suggestions for amendments, and overall critiques. My final proposal was something that I was very proud of. (Artifact1) It was in this class that I believed that I would be a qualitative researcher. I think it is the social aspect of this research design that I like so much (i.e., interviews and focus groups) versus the heavy numerical and statistical data needed for quantitative research.

In Dr. Watts’ class, Principles of Leadership, I began to understand what true leadership is. I learned about the different leadership styles, transformational, servant, situational, etc. I can remember in one of the early classes, Dr. Watts was listing some of the world’s foremost outstanding leaders. On that list was Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Winston Churchill, and Hitler. Clearly, Dr. Watts threw Hitler on the list to “raise a few eyebrows”; but I was intrigued on why he thought Hitler was such a great leader. I did not know if Dr. Watts was a Nazi supporter or what. Dr. Watts told us to broaden our scope of leadership. He mentioned that not all great leaders are admirable. Hitler, Dr. Watts stated, was a man that created a movement with millions of followers. As grotesque as his beliefs may have been, as a leader, he was astounding. When I thought about it, he was right. Professionally, this course has helped me improve as a supervisor in so many ways. One of the first lessons I learned from this class was to not present myself as a dominant force or have a better-than-my-subordinates type of attitude. “Leaders address themselves to followers’ wants, needs, and other motivations, as well as to their own, and thus they serve as an independent force in changing the makeup of the followers’ motive base through gratifying their motives” (Burns, pg. 20). From the lessons learned in this course I was able to identify my own leadership style as situational leadership. (Artifact 2) Situational Leadership refers to a leader that adjusts their leadership methods to match the competence and ability level of their followers and the overall situation at hand. For example, oftentimes I will be implementing a program on campus when my supervisor will call me in for an unscheduled meeting that I must attend. I have to adapt to the situation by assigning a trustworthy and competent worker to oversee my program in my place while I attend the mandatory meeting; or when my supervisor is leading a conversation or meeting and steps out and asks me to take over in her absence. I must adapt to the situation and lead accordingly.

The Introduction to Doctoral Studies was not a class, but a one-day seminar for all Marshall University’s doctoral students. This seminar was very helpful. At first the seminar seemed a little overwhelming. Veteran students talked to us about the requirement of us to do a research project (prior to our dissertation), we must submit research for publication, we have to present research at a regional or national conference, and all of this must be done before we could even begin writing for our dissertation. I am not going to lie, I felt like quitting. Then we were told that we needed to select a committee chair as soon as possible. At that time, I did not even know what a committee chair was and the only two professors I knew were Dr. Childress and Dr. Watts. Thankfully, later that afternoon I met Dr. Campbell and she put all of my fears to rest. She put everything into perspective and let us know how doable it really was to satisfy the set requirements. I remember that I actually asked Dr. Campbell, how were we expected to select a committee chair if we have only taken one or two classes? She asked me what my profession was and if I had an idea of a dissertation topic. I answered her questions and she quickly suggested that I talk to Dr. Sherry Early. I remember Dr. Campbell telling me that Dr. Early has some student affairs experience and she believed that she may be a great fit for what I am trying to accomplish. Unfortunately, I was unable to meet Dr. Early that day, but I left the seminar feeling more confident about being a doctoral student than I did when I began.

In the spring 2017 semester, I had Dr. Meisel’s Statistical Methods class. I was terrified to take a stats class. I failed stats in college--twice. I changed my major because I could not pass my accounting class in college. I have always struggled with numbers. Fortunately, Dr. Meisel did the impossible. She taught the class in a way that allowed me to comprehend the methods and apply those learned methods in the appropriate setting. Understanding the measures of central tendency (i.e., mean, median, and mode); nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio as different levels of measurement; understanding what standard deviation means and when to use a t-test are just a few statistical methods learned during this course. The group project we did in class was a culmination of everything we learned. My group consisted of Lori, Jacob, and Valery. The assignment was to dissect and formulate statistical data from the article Dr. Meisel provided, using the methods we learned in class. (Artifact 3) Utilizing what I learned from this course, I will be able to determine statistical significance in research, follow and comprehend statistical data in research, better understand variables, as well as formulate statistical methods when needed in my own research.

That semester I also took the Administration Theory course taught by Dr. Nicholson. This was one of the most challenging classes that I have ever taken. Learning about Karl Marx and Marxism, and Neo Marxism, theories, hypotheses, functionalism, etc., was, in itself, a different type of learning for me. Not to mention how Dr. Nicholson would literally saturate my work with red font comments and corrections; but I appreciated the candid feedback. What I enjoyed most from this class were the in-class discussions. Often times, I would not comprehend the readings or be able to understand how Marxism and Neo-Marxism has anything to do with the “Why We Banned Legos” article by Ann Pelo and Kendra Pelojoaquin; but through the class discussions, I and my colleagues were able to make the correlation. These types of conversations happened week in and week out. I would read the assigned readings and would barely comprehend what I read, but when I would get in class and Dr. Nicholson would begin to break the readings down, it would make the assignment comprehensible. Our fifth assignment in the class was to look at a Higher Education Policy Commission policy and decipher the theory that the policy was written from. This was beneficial because it allowed me to apply what I have learned to an actual modern day policy. (Artifact 4)

The summer of 2017 I took Survey Research in Education and Financial Models in Education. The survey course was taught by Dr. Childress, and I must admit that I had no idea how technical surveys could be, nor did I understand how beneficial surveys could be to research. Dr. Childress taught this class in a similar manner of the Research Design class. We would read a chapter in the *How to Conduct Surveys* text book, and write critiques of each chapter. I learned how questions would differ in a quantitative survey versus a qualitative survey. I began to understand the importance of sample sizes, formulating concise questions pertinent to the topic, utilizing the proper scales, and even how the appearance of a scale is important to the validity of the outcome of a survey. The final assignment in the class was a PowerPoint of our comprehension of the varieties of surveys and all the facets required to formulate a comprehensible and beneficial survey. (Artifact 5)

The second course I took during the summer 2017 semester was Financial Models in Education, taught by Dr. Bethel. This was a pretty straight forward class. We learned about the various ways schools in the K-12 system and higher education system budget their finances as well as the various financial issues that surround K-12 schools and institutions of higher education; we also critiqued various articles that Dr. Bethel assigned us to read. (Artifact 6) This was not a class where I can say that I learned a lot. I have worked in the higher education system since 2001 and I have known about the financial issues institutions in higher education face for quite some time now. I can recall WVSU losing the community college. This loss removed roughly 40% of the fiscal year budget. The loss of the community college decreased the overall enrollment by approximately 2,000 students. To put this in perspective, 2,000 students at $20,000 per academic year (tuition and fees) equals $40 million dollars. I began to see the creativity of the administration in order to keep the doors open. Of course tuition increased, but so did the scholarship offerings, and advertisements; the institution began a Metro Tuition Program, Tuition Loyalty Program, etc. I have witnessed how the institution amended their internal spending practices; more accountability was given to the vice presidents, staff had to attend various financial and ethical spending seminars and trainings, and so on. These experiences have prepared me to address such issues in the future if I were ever to be an administrator tasked with providing solutions for various financial issues.

In the fall of 2017, I was dealing with some exhausting personal issues. I actually considered not enrolling for classes that semester. My grandmother was terminally ill, and her declining health required more and more of my time. Emotionally, I was just exhausted, but I decided to persevere and continue on with my education.

Dr. Nicholson taught the Ethical Theory course that semester. This class was probably the most difficult of all my courses during my tenure as a doc student. Every class began with a Donald Trump bashing. I mean, how could we not talk about ethics or the lack there of and not mention The Donald? The class quickly learned that Dr. Nicholson was not a fan of Trump or his administration. I recall in one class we were talking about ethical fading and Dr. Nicholson used the Trump administration as an example of the term. She went on a rant for at least 30 minutes. I loved it. We learned about the philosophies of individuals such as Ayn Rand and her view of objectivism; whereas she believes everyone has their very own role to play on earth. She believed that altruism and self-sacrifice would corrupt society. She advocated for people to be selfish. Not selfishness in the meaning of sacrificing someone for another person’s gain; but selfishness in respects of worrying about you as an individual, and only you and your place or role on earth; making the most out of the one life you have on earth. Other philosophers were examined, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, who was a prophet of nihilism and coined the phrase “God is Dead.” Nietzsche believed in embracing our wants and desires as a guide to achievement. He was strongly in opposition to Christianity and religion in general. He believed that Christianity thwarted people’s ability to embrace envy and jealousy, which are traits that he believed motivated people to do and be better. We also read about Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, and many more. We also talked about current issues in the world; Charlottesville, affirmative action, and politics, to name a few. I have to be honest, I struggled with my writing in this class. Dr. Nicholson brutally dissected my assignments accompanied by vey direct comments. Dealing with what I was dealing with in my personal life, I just did not seem to care about my decline in my classroom performance at that time. Looking back, I could say that I was in a shallow state of depression. Toward the end of the semester, Dr. Nicholson and I did have a meeting and she voiced her concern for my academic downward slide. I wholeheartedly appreciated that conversation. I briefly explained to her that I was dealing with some personal issues, but I did not go into detail, mainly because I did not want any special treatment. I wanted to earn this degree just like everyone else in my cohort. She explained to me what she was looking for in the writing assignments and provided me with an example to use as a guide. The final writing was a vast improvement. (Artifact 7)

Dr. Sherry Early taught the Legal Issues in Education class during this semester in addition to the Ethics class that Dr. Nicholson taught. I really enjoyed this class. Dr. Early had us write class reflections after every class and assigned case briefs for us to review and present to the class. (Artifact 8) I really liked the structure of this course. It was engaging and informative. I can recall my case brief presentation on the Michael GILBERT, Plaintiff-Appellant, v. SETON HALL UNIVERSITY, Defendant-Appellee case. The case was about Mr. Gilbert sustaining paralyzing injuries during an intermural sporting activity. He sued his school, Seton Hall, because he never signed a liability waiver form and for not providing adequate supervision, which he believed contributed to his accident. This case directly affected me professionally. I am over the intramural program at WVSU. I have never made the intramural participants sign a liability waiver form. I never thought about it and no one has ever asked me about a waiver form; however, because of this class, I now make every participant sign a waiver form in order to protect myself and the institution from being liable for accidents. The final assignment in the class was to present a research proposal inclusive of how legal cases have influenced the research topic. (Artifact 9) Parts of this assignment could possibly be used in my dissertation prospectus.

The spring 2018 consisted of Dr. Anderson’s Current Issues in Higher Education class and Dr. Securro’s Computer Data Analysis in C&I Research course. Dr. Anderson’s course provided a look at higher education from a standpoint of sustainability. In this course, we compared structure of academia in the past to the structure of academia today. We conducted a Delphi Study (Artifact 10) and wrote in depth responses to questions pertaining to higher education as reflected in the artifacts. (Artifact 11) Though we only met two or three times during this semester, I really enjoyed it. Dr. Anderson has worked at many institutions in higher education throughout this country. His wealth of knowledge was evident during our class discussions. Our final assignment was to write a white paper on the topic of our choice, just as long as it pertained to higher education. This assignment allowed us to apply what we have learned in the class through the class discussions and assignments, and include it in the final assignment. (Artifact 12)

Finally, my last course was Dr. Lassiter’s Qualitative Research course. This was a course that interested me because I want to be a qualitative researcher. To begin the semester, we had to read a book entitled: *Thinking Outside the Girl Box*, by Linda Spatig and Layne Amerikaner. The book is qualitative study of the success and effect of the Girl’s Resiliency Program on young females in Lincoln County, WV. Surprisingly, this was a really good book. Though I am not from Lincoln County, a lot of the issues that plague that area also plague areas that I am all too familiar with. The book reflected my childhood and the childhood of a lot of my friends as well. The first assignment given was for us to write field notes at a coffee shop or restaurant. I thought this would be a simple task, but I quickly learned that there is no such thing as being too detailed while writing field notes. (Artifact 13) Another assignment I thoroughly enjoyed was the interview assignment. We were tasked with interviewing someone that interests us. After the interview we were tasked with logging the whole interview and transcribing ten minutes of the same interview. (Artifact 14 & 14.1) I interviewed my Vice President of Student Affairs and we had a two-hour conversation. I learned a lot about her and the field of student affairs; however, I had no idea how tedious it is to transcribe an interview. It took me over an hour to transcribe ten minutes. I can only imagine how long it will take to transcribe an hour or more. In my hopes of doing qualitative research for my dissertation, this class was invaluable. Dr. Lassiter really explained how to properly conduct interviews, field notes; we talked about various approaches to qualitative research, different interview and transcription techniques, etc. What I have learned in this class will directly support my ability to properly structure a qualitative research project.

**Collaborations**

My entire experience as a doctoral student has been based on various collaborations. The cohort of students that I am a part of has created a group chat were we all discuss various issues that we face during the program, we give assistance to each other when possible, we encourage each other almost on a daily basis, and we genuinely want each other to succeed, not only in this program but in life in general. Throughout this program, our professors encourage collaborative efforts. As previously mentioned, I have done group work in Dr. Meisel’s class, Dr. Lassiter’s class, Dr. Childress’ class, etc. Being a student, on this level, requires constant support and genuine dedication. The faculty in this program understand that and lend to assisting us in any way possible.

**Research Project**

As a requirement for graduation, doctoral students must present research at an approved regional or national conference. A doctoral student must also submit research for publication. I satisfied both of these requirements with a research project entitled: Qualitative Bibliometrics. This project was spearheaded by Dr. Jessica Hanna. The most accurate definition of bibliometrics is “the use of mathematical and statistical methods to study and identify patterns in the usage of materials and services within a library or to analyze the historical development of a specific body of literature, especially its authorship, publication, and use” (Welsh, 2015, p. 1). I was responsible for looking through hundreds of published dissertations and documenting the keywords or identifiers in each study relating to educational leadership. Dr. Hanna submitted the research for publication and we presented at the SCREA Conference in New Orleans in October 2017. I can remember sitting in the crowd waiting to present at the SCREA conference. I was extremely nervous. I have presented in front of crowds before, but for some reason this particular presentation had my nerves rattled. When the time came for Dr. Hanna and I to present the research, I quickly realized that I had over reacted. The atmosphere was calm and Dr. Hanna and I sailed through the presentation with no issues. (Artifact 15)

**Certifications**

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

As a requirement to do research as a Marshall student, one must be IRB certified. During Dr. Childress’ Research Design course, he required us to get certified before the end of the semester. The primary purpose of the IRB is to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects involved in research activities being conducted under its authority. The initial certification process was quite lengthy. It took me a few days to complete the certification. I got re-certified this past April; the process was quick and painless; completely different experience from the initial certification process. (Artifact 16 & 16.1)

**Depth of Understanding**

Burns writes, “One of the most universal cravings of our time is a hunger for compelling and creative leadership.” (p.1) I could not agree more with this statement. Especially in the era of living we are experiencing today. We are living in an era where Nietzsche’s philosophy of, the powerful will maintain their power at all cost, is a philosophy that our government is attempting to build its legacy upon. This program has made me aware of the philosophical climate and the various theories that are in play in this modern day era – for example, feminism. Women are making it their point to be heard and taken seriously; and finally, people are starting to listen. Movements like “Me Too” and “Slut Walk” are two movements that are fueled by the modern day empowerment of women. Ethically, I believe we are being driven by the consequentialist or teleological theory. Allow me to use the Trump administration as an example. Teleological theory simply means the outcome is what is important. The separation of illegal immigrant children from their parents, semi-condoning white supremacist groups, demonizing anyone who challenges the government, discrediting the media, telling “false truths,” criticizing and mocking war heroes and disabled citizens, etc., are all ploys used satisfy a particular base. The outcome will be, at least they hope, more votes from right and far right wing citizens. Who is hurt or degraded in the process is unimportant. These are just a few examples of what I have come to comprehend in relation to leadership, ethics, and theories; and I owe it all to the Leadership Studies program.

**Reflection**

Looking back on my experience as a doctoral student at Marshall University, all I can do is smile. It has been a transformational experience. When I began this journey I really did not know what to expect. What I encountered has been nothing less of a blessing. My cohort consists of an amazing group of people. I have enjoyed embarking on this journey with them immensely. I would not trade them or this experience for the world. As a cohort, we have supported each other every step of the way. I pray for all the success in the world for every one of them.

Individually, I do not know where to begin. At the beginning I was academically rusty. I had been out of school for eleven years prior to beginning this program. My writing needed work and I was not used to reading for academic purposes; I had to reacquaint myself with being a student. I had to reprioritize my whole life and dedicate myself to this program and I believe that I did. Being a doc student here at Marshall University has taught me a variety of things on a personal level. I am now more self-motivated; I now have a habit to research a topic that I am not familiar with and question the status quo; I have an overall urge to learn more in my field; I also have better time management skills. I recall during my interview, when I was trying to get accepted into the Leadership program, there were many questions asked in reference to my support group; did I have any kids, is my significant other supportive of my efforts to pursue this degree, what is a typical work day like for me, etc. I now know why those questions were asked. If anyone has a desire to pursue a doctorate degree and has a child or family, then that prospective student needs to have a spouse and other family members that are understanding and supportive because this pursuit is very time consuming. There were days that I was supposed to take my kid to the park or to Sky Zone, but I could not because my course work assignments were due by midnight on Sunday. If it was not for the understanding and support of my family, I would not have made it this far. I also learned perseverance. There were so many times throughout this process that I wanted to quit or at least take a break. I am so glad that I did not. The support of my colleagues, family, friends, and professors taught me that there are always people that are champions of your cause. It came to a point where I felt like I could not quit. I did not want to disappoint anyone after all the support they have given me.

Academically, I have become a more consistent writer. Through the artifacts presented with this essay I hope that whoever reads this can see the progress made from 2016 to present day. Prior to this program I only read when necessary. I have never been a person that enjoys reading; however, that changed during this program. From the odd readings assigned by Dr. Nicholson, to the many case studies assigned by Dr. Early, to the endless chapter readings and critiques assigned by Dr. Childress, I have grown to appreciate the variations of readings assigned. I have learned how to better formulate and articulate answers to questions or scenarios proposed by professors.

Professionally, my critical thinking skills have improved greatly. Because of classes such as Principles of Leadership, Administrative Theory, Ethical Theory, and Legal Issues in Education, I now have a broader understanding of the realm of higher education and its history. I can now identify various leadership styles and methods, I can now recognize different ethical theories while in the workplace, I can now speak with some sophistication with my professional colleagues about issues faced in higher education; not just in West Virginia but nationwide. I am now better prepared to progress in the field of student affairs as I pursue a vice presidency at an institution of higher education.

I would like to thank all of my professors for sharing their knowledge and expertise with me and my colleagues as we pursue excellence. After all, we are a reflection of those who teach us. I hope to one day make all of them proud.

References

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